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THEOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY

Toward the Integrated Study of Religion in the University

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One in a series of essays
prepared for the University Divinity School Project
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Introduction

In the 1980s a creative group of North American theological educators opened a new chapter in a story that has stretched over nearly 200 years. They sought fresh answers to a question that had confronted their predecessors since the early 19th century: "What is the distinctive work of the theological school?" In the course of their work during the last decade, these educators gradually developed an extensive and often suggestive body of writings about the aims and purposes of theological education. Some of the most gifted leaders in this enterprise were faculty members at university divinity schools.

Interestingly, however, this literature included little about the particular vocation of the university-related theological school. Indeed, no generation of 20th-century educators has attempted to address the topic. Now, thanks to the support of the Lilly Endowment for the work of the University Divinity School Project, a new set of resources will be available to university leaders and divinity school faculty as they contemplate the future of this important institution in the 21st century.

The publications of the project will offer several perspectives on this subject. Conrad Cherry has written the first comprehensive account of the university divinity school and its history over the last 100 years. In his new work, *Hurrying Toward Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools and American Protestantism*, Cherry explains how the pressures of American history in the 20th century have eroded older, often unstated, but nevertheless powerful definitions of the divinity schools' vocation in both the universities and the larger society. The character and influence of these schools, which could once be taken for granted, appear today to belong to a rapidly receding past.

The final report of the project, *Theology in the University: A Study of University-Related Divinity Schools*, is another source of information about these schools. In it, the director of the project, James L. Waits, outlines the challenges facing the divinity school in the university today and urges a new and participatory citizenship on the

part of faculty, administrators, and students. An analysis of some of the more persistent issues facing these institutions (issues such as faculty development, administrative leadership, student admissions, financial and other resources) is also undertaken. The challenges outlined in this study are both difficult and energizing for the future viability of theology in the university.

Another resource is this series of essays. Each of these essays poses thoughtful questions and intriguing arguments that should figure in the coming conversations about the future of the university divinity schools. They represent important claims about the mission and vocation of these institutions. Here are eight voices that deserve to be heard in the days ahead:

The Divinity School in the University:

A Distinctive Institution

Martin E. Marty

University Divinity Schools: Their Advantages

James M. Gustafson

The Evangelical Task in the Modern University

George M. Marsden

The Theological Work of the University Scholar

Joseph C. Hough, Jr.

Toward the Integrated Study of Religion in the University

Ronald F. Thiemann

The Moral Purpose of the University

James T. Laney

Institutional Revitalization:

Leadership, Process, and Providence

Larry Jones

A Failure of Leadership?

Globalization and the University Divinity School

Judith A. Berling

These essays were edited by Robert W. Lynn, former Senior Vice President of the Lilly Endowment, and James L. Waits, Executive Director of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. They are produced as part of the University Divinity School Project, initiated by the Lilly Endowment in 1988.

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He is the author of four books including the forthcoming *Religion in American Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (to be published in January 1996 by Georgetown University Press) and *Toward an American Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (1991). His articles have appeared in numerous scholarly and professional journals.

He is a member of the Board of Governors of Trinity Press International in New York and serves as a member of the Advisory Board of the Project on Theological Reflection in a Pluralistic Setting of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. He also served on the Task Force on Theological Education and the Task Force on Lutheran-Reformed Theological Conversations for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He lectures widely on religion in American public life and on pluralism in American culture.

Toward the Integrated Study of Religion in the University

RONALD F. THIEMANN

The university divinity schools constitute a distinct category of institutions within contemporary theological education. Like the freestanding denominational seminaries, they offer the basic degree leading to professional ministry, the Master of Divinity. Like departments of religious studies they participate in undergraduate education and offer doctoral degrees, either the Ph.D. or the Th.D., in advanced specialized fields. Divinity schools in church-governed or church-sponsored universities may have strong ties, both historic and contemporary, to the founding denomination of the university, while schools affiliated with secular private universities may be more fully ecumenical and non-sectarian. The university divinity schools, for all their differences, share a dual loyalty to the standards and values of the research university and to the commitments of the communities of faith which many of their graduates serve. That dual loyalty identifies both the potential and the vulnerability of these schools.

While the universities of which these schools are a part were founded by religious communities, their contemporary missions have been shaped by the secular ethos that has dominated higher education since the end of the Second World War. While it may have been self-evident in the Christianized society of the 18th or 19th century that the training of clergy for Christian denominations was essential to the mission of the university, in today's pluralistic and secularized society preparation for ministry is no longer an indisputable aspect of university education. Many would argue that ministerial training is best carried out in denominational seminaries, and as the pool of qualified M.Div. applicants shrinks, many denominations are adopting guidelines that make it difficult for ministerial candidates to attend the ecumenical university schools. The professional programs of these schools can be questioned both by those in

the university who are uncomfortable with the “faith dimension” of theological education and by those in the churches who are uncomfortable with the university’s commitment to rigorous critical inquiry.

The involvement of these schools in undergraduate, masters’, and doctoral programs in the study of religion is less controversial. It would be difficult to deny the extraordinary significance of religion in the development of the world’s cultures as well as in contemporary political and social events. Clearly the well educated student must understand the formative role of religion in shaping the values, social norms, and institutional life of global societies. Yet the presence of religious studies departments in the same universities that host divinity schools suggests that the study of religion can just as easily be carried out by these departments in the faculties of arts and sciences. Indeed, because religious studies departments tend to teach a much broader range of religious traditions than the historically Christian divinity schools, an argument can be made that these departments provide a broader and more diverse form of education to university students.

Despite the evident challenges facing these “mixed mission” divinity schools, the thesis of this essay is that the university related divinity schools have a distinctive role to play within the university and contemporary public life. Indeed, their hybrid character ought to be viewed as an advantage in overcoming the many debilitating dichotomies that plague life within the university. University divinity schools are *professional* schools with a difference; they prepare students for a profession in which technical competence and social/economic status are not the distinguishing marks. Along with schools of education, divinity schools exemplify the responsibility of the university to train leaders of social conscience who are committed to public service. University divinity schools are *graduate* schools with a difference; by holding together the dimensions of theory and practice, of rigorous reflection with involvement in public affairs, they embody the university’s dual commitment to academic excellence and social responsibility.

This essay will first explore the historical roots of the divinity schools' peculiar hybrid character and will then proceed to develop the case for these schools' distinctive contribution to the life and mission of the contemporary university.

Ministry: A Peculiar American Profession

In establishing a center of learning for the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636, the founders of Harvard College expressed their rationale as follows:

After God had carried us safe to New England and wee had builded our houses, provided necessities for our livelihood, rear'd convenient places for God's worship and settled the civil government: One of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.

Most private institutions of higher education in the United States were established by religious communities, and many of those founded during the Colonial period were specifically organized to educate a learned ministry for the Christian churches. Education in America's first colleges was designed to shape both mind and character so that graduates might contribute to the general welfare of the Christian commonwealth. Because ministry was understood to be a public vocation, no provisions were made to design a special course of study for those preparing for ordination. The college curriculum was designed to prepare students for positions of leadership in a Christian society; the skills peculiar to the practice of ordained ministry were to be learned not in the college but through an apprenticeship with a local clergyman.

Not until the beginning of the 19th century did the notion of a special course of studies for ministerial students arise. In 1808 orthodox Congregationalists, appalled by the appointment of the liberal theologian Henry Ware, Jr. to the Hollis Professorship at

Harvard, established the first freestanding school of theology at Andover. In response, Harvard organized a graduate program for ministerial students (1811) and then created the Faculty of Divinity (1816), thereby establishing the University's second professional school and the first nondenominational theological faculty in the country. The two principles enunciated at the founding of Harvard Divinity School significantly influenced the subsequent development of university divinity schools. The founders committed the school "to the serious, impartial, and unbiased investigation of Christian truth" and determined that "no commitment to the particularities of any creed would be demanded of either faculty or students."

Though the establishment of separate graduate faculties of divinity within universities contributed to the acceptance of ministry as one of the "learned professions," it also altered the fundamental rationale for the inclusion of theological studies within the university. Prior to the creation of divinity schools most educators assumed that theological subjects—particularly the study of Scripture, church history, and natural philosophy—were essential to the training of the liberally educated student and thus belonged to the basic curriculum of the university. With the organization of graduate schools of theology, however, the rationale for theological studies shifted, focusing now on the goal of preparing students for the profession of ministry. The theological curriculum was justifiably included within the university because Christian ministry was understood to be one of those professions for which university education was appropriate. As long as ministry was viewed as a profession that addressed essential societal needs, divinity education could be included in the broad professional rationale that justified training in fields like medicine and law.

In contrast to the fields of law and medicine, however, ministry did not develop along the lines of a classic American profession. The consolidation of institutional authority that occurred in law and medicine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries has no parallel within ministry. All three professions were loosely organized in the mid-19th century, but ministry and law were clearly perceived to be

the more prestigious professions. A study conducted in 1851 by the American Medical Association (AMA) reported that of the careers chosen by 12,400 men who had graduated from eight leading colleges between 1800 and 1850, 26 percent entered ministry, 25 percent became lawyers, while just under eight percent became physicians. The report noted the paucity of students graduating with honors who had chosen to enter medical school and concluded that among the “educated talent” of the nation there was a general distaste for a career in medicine.

In his recent study of the medical profession, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, Paul Starr points out that “for both medicine and religion, the 19th century in America was a period of growing sectarianism.” The 19th century witnessed a proliferation of Christian denominations, particularly among those classes, regions, and ethnic groups not represented by the “mainstream” Protestant churches clustered in the Northeast. A similar sectarianism arose in medicine, represented particularly by the eclectics and the homeopaths, groups that opposed many of the practices of the “regular profession” represented by the AMA. The vigorous conflict generated by these opposing medical groups declined, however, in the late 19th century as state governments pressured the profession to adopt uniform licensing procedures to protect the public from unscrupulous practitioners. In response to the desire for greater uniformity in medical practice, the AMA restructured its organization in 1900 in order to become a more genuinely national association. Within 10 years membership in the AMA grew from 8,000 (in 1900) to 70,000 (in 1910), as physicians sought the authorizing sanction of the national organization. At the same time a movement, initiated in part by the AMA, to elevate and standardize the requirements for medical education gained significant momentum. The AMA’s Council on Medical Education, established in 1904 and composed of faculty members from five major universities, set and enforced standards that resulted in the strengthening of the primary university medical schools and the elimination of those schools that could not meet the minimum standards. Through this process, medical education became fully assimilated into the culture of the

research university, while remaining in living contact with medical practice, particularly through the teaching hospitals.

The proliferation of diverse groups was much more dramatic within religion during the 19th century. The number of denominations grew from 35 in 1800 to more than 200 by 1900. By 1850 two denominations that had flourished during the westward expansion, the Methodists and Baptists, became the largest Christian bodies in the United States, overtaking the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians whose membership remained primarily along the Eastern Seaboard. As denominations grew rapidly during the post-Civil War Era, they struggled to provide ministers for the congregations springing up across the country. Denominations adopted radically different requirements for clerical preparation, and educational standards for entrance into ministry varied dramatically. The traditional independence of the churches, built into the fabric of the nation through the first amendment to the Constitution, accelerated throughout the late 19th century. Lacking any external pressures for consolidation and standardization, ministry developed few of the marks characteristic of professions such as law and medicine. Diversity and diffusion of authority, rather than consolidation and standardization, characterized the development of ministry through the last decades of the nineteenth century. The turn of the century saw the founding of myriad denominational seminaries as churches sought to preserve the distinctiveness of their own confessional traditions, thereby further fragmenting the process by which clergy were prepared for ministry. The movement toward standardization within theological education did not emerge until after the First World War, and even then the accrediting organization, now called The Association of Theological Schools, possessed none of the authority of the equivalent agencies within the professions of law and medicine. Given the democratic politics of the ATS, it historically responded primarily to the needs of the denominational seminaries which constituted the vast majority of its membership.

A look at the evolution of the medical and divinity schools at Harvard during the final three decades of the 19th century provides an illuminating example of contrasting patterns of relation between university-based education and the practice of the profession. With the election of Charles Eliot to the presidency of Harvard in 1869, education in the schools of medicine and theology was revitalized, but the relation between the schools and their respective professions was altered in decisively different ways. Simply stated, the strengthening of medical education and the standardization of practice within the medical profession were mutually reinforcing developments that forged an essential bond between the school and the profession; the strengthening of theological education took place, by sharp contrast, through the growing distance of the divinity school from the diverse and irregular standards of the various denominations.

Under Eliot's leadership the medical faculty "resolved to venture upon a complete revolution of the system of medical education." The medical school was for the first time integrated into the educational patterns of the larger university. Its finances were placed under the control of the Harvard Corporation, and professors were provided regular salaries to replace the direct fees they had previously received from students. Paul Starr describes the important changes in patterns of medical education: "The academic year was extended from four months to nine, the length of training needed to graduate rose from two years to three. In physiology, chemistry, and pathological anatomy, laboratory work was added to or replaced didactic lectures. Students henceforth would have to pass all their courses to graduate." Coterminous with the emphasis upon laboratory science, medical research began to focus upon issues associated with clinical practice, thus bringing research and practice aims into closer relation with one another. With the establishment of the medical school at Johns Hopkins University in 1893, the link between medical research and medical practice became firmly established, and the teaching hospital became the locus for the interaction among science, research, and clinical practice.

No such parallel development can be discovered at any of the university divinity schools; consequently the rationale for the professional training of ministers within the university has been much more difficult to discern. At Harvard President Eliot strongly affirmed his support of theological education in 1879, but his argument focused not on the role of the divinity school as a professional school but on the importance of theology as “one of the most fruitful fields of human inquiry” that introduces students to “the company of some of the noblest minds which the race has brought forth.” Ironically, Eliot’s rationale hearkened back to an older justification for theological education in the university, namely, the importance of the “objective or scientific” study of religion for the liberally educated student. His support of the school, while warmly received, did little to establish the importance of the divinity school’s mission within the university to prepare students for the learned ministry. Instead, theological education at Harvard developed along the lines of a scientific paradigm that emphasized critical historical and philological studies, and minimized the importance of normative and practical forms of inquiry. Precisely as Harvard Divinity School drew closer to the historical disciplines within the faculty of arts and sciences, it moved away from the very practices of the profession for which it was preparing students. Consequently the rationale that justified the study of religion at the university functioned to widen the gap between university-based theological education and professional practice.

The problem of stating a coherent rationale for university-based theological education is traceable in large part to the peculiar status of ministry as one of the “learned professions.” Ministers, unlike their counterparts in law and medicine, do not possess the kind of technical expertise that has become the distinguishing mark of the contemporary professional; consequently they cannot rely upon the structures of authority that characterize those professions, that control a socially desired form of expertise. In addition, the continuing power of denominationalism within American Christianity has allowed the primary locus of professional authority to remain within national church bodies that control access to the ministerium

through their denominational seminaries and boards of ministry. While The Association of Theological Schools sets minimal standards for theological education, historically it has not functioned in concert with the university-based schools to define criteria of competence within the profession in relation to the research agenda of the university. Because the recent intellectual atmosphere of the research university has not been especially hospitable to the aims of communities of faith, church bodies have often been skeptical of the critical standards of scholarship represented by the university-related divinity schools, thereby making the relation of the schools to the profession all the more complicated.

Toward an Integrated Model of Theological Education

The basic challenge facing the university divinity schools is to develop a rationale for theological education that links the academic study of religion to the professional preparation for ministry. Only such an integrated rationale will allow these schools to recapture the unity inherent in their dual loyalty to the standards of the research university and the commitments of communities of faith. Unlike their counterparts in law and medicine, however, these schools cannot rely upon an established structure of authority within the profession to link their research aims to professional practice. Rather, these schools must seek to devise a case for theological education that critically engages both the mission of the university and the ministries of communities of faith.

In order to provide leadership for the various Christian denominations, university divinity schools must broaden and sharpen their understanding of the distinctive role they play in preparing persons for ministry. While these schools must be responsive to the needs of the churches, they must also take quite seriously their role in setting standards of excellence for the learned ministry. At a time when strong anti-intellectual forces (often under the guise of a concern for “pastoral care” or “spirituality”) are at work in the denominations, the university schools must represent an unstinting commitment to academic and intellectual excellence in preparation for ministry.

moral issues inherent in the development of public policies. Consequently medical, law, and business students often lack the most basic orientation to moral reasoning, and theological students are painfully naive about the data, forms of analysis, and assumptions of the policy-related fields. Neither universities nor communities of faith are well served by this unfortunate bifurcation. University divinity schools can serve as the catalysts within the university to encourage new forms of collaboration among professional schools. By regaining a sense of the *public responsibility* of the vocation of ministry, divinity schools can make an important contribution to the overall mission of the university. In so doing, they can take a vital step toward rediscovering the unity inherent in their dual commitment to university and church.

Earlier I noted that ministry is a peculiar profession because it has not experienced the consolidation of authority that characterized the other “learned professions.” While this anomalous situation has made it more difficult to devise a convincing rationale for the place of theological education within the university, it has also relieved ministry of some of the burdens of the more centralized professions. The adoption of uniform standards within medicine, for example, also led to a more uniform social composition within the profession. As Starr observes, “The high costs of medical education and more stringent requirements limited the entry of students from the lower and working classes. And deliberate policies of discrimination against Jews, women, and blacks promoted still greater social homogeneity. The opening of medicine to immigrants and women, which the competitive system of medical education allowed in the 1890s, was now reversed.” Between 1900 and 1960, women constituted only five percent of medical student admissions. A similar exclusion of African Americans from medical education meant that by the mid-20th century only one of every 3,000 black Americans was a doctor, and in the South blacks had one doctor for every 14,000 persons.

The racial and gender diversity within theological education today provides an opportunity to open the conversation about the interaction between the missions of the university and the churches

to voices and persons previously excluded from those deliberations. As James Laney points out in a companion piece to this essay, the university needs "a new sheltering ethos, but one reformed by the definitions and experiences of those among the marginalized who refuse to be bought off by our current power concerns. We need to build an ethos that will make it impossible to conduct business as usual." As universities face the difficult challenges of the 1990s their divinity schools have a unique perspective to offer to those conversations that will shape higher education for the 21st century. These hybrid institutions, loyal both to the standards of the university and the commitments of communities of faith, can contribute to the intellectual vigor and the moral vision of both communities. In order to make that contribution, however, they will have to reform and broaden their own sense of purpose and mission. In that task they will need the support, both intellectual and financial, of the universities' central administrations.

Universities need vigorous, self-confident divinity schools, institutions devoted to preparing intellectually acute leaders for lives of service in public affairs. In the coming decades, divinity schools will need to reclaim their place of full citizenship within the university, thereby contributing to the university's own effort to maintain the fragile balance between its research and educational mission and its role as an institution of power and responsibility. At a time when difficult decisions must be made about the priorities of the university, a significant investment in the future of the divinity schools will yield genuine dividends for many years to come.

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